

Five ways to enhance diversity through workplace design

One of the big learnings from the global pandemic for the world of work and workplace was the need for greater social equity, diversity and inclusion. Different groups of employees had different experiences during lockdown depending on their race, gender, age and ability. Inequalities came to the fore during the coronavirus crisis in way that has made many companies today prioritise the needs of employees from a range of different backgrounds.

But as firms navigate the new era of work and remodel their offices to address more flexible work patterns, how can the workplace itself enhance diversity and inclusion? Here are five ways to boost diversity by design to create a welcoming environment for all:

1. Engage in co-design

Compared to such fields as community planning or consumer electronics, office design has been slow off the mark to directly engage users in the creative process, listen to people with diverse lived experiences and co-design solutions *with* them instead of *for* them. However, there are signs that could be changing – especially in relation to the needs of people with disabilities.

According to the World Health Organisation, around one billion people require some sort of assistive technology in the workplace. This is estimated to double to two billion by 2050. Early interventions between designers and people living with disabilities boosts diversity through design as it highlights that their needs are not an afterthought but baked into the design process. Co-design often leads to inclusive solutions that improve the work environment for everyone –step-free access, for example – rather than special needs interventions that stigmatise.

2. Private quiet spaces

Designing for neurodiversity is widely seen today as improving workforce diversity and widening perspectives within the organisation. So, implementing private and quiet spaces for people who are neurodivergent also boosts diversity through design. Neurodiversity means that the human brain does not come in a one-size-fits-all. Neurological conditions such as autism are on a wide spectrum where there is a variation regarding learning, attention and mood.

Around 15 to 20 per cent of workers are neurodivergent and they tend to be under or over-stimulated by their environment, which is triggered by factors that can include noise, lighting, texture, smell and temperature. Therefore, creating a workplace design that allows employees with neurological conditions to have a private space to work boosts diversity as their needs are being addressed.

It isn't just neurodivergent workers who want privacy and quiet spaces to work. Research suggests that this is a requirement right across the professional workforce. Contrary to the idea that the post-pandemic office will solely become a face-to-face forum for collaboration and socialising, many employees want a dedicated zone to work with the quiet they enjoyed at home. A survey by Steelcase of almost 5,000 global office workers across 11 countries highlighted that 61 per cent of workers wanted a private space in the office to work.

3. Respect religious beliefs

A third way to boost diversity through design is to provide spaces for employees with religious beliefs. To illustrate, those of the Muslim faith tend to pray up to five times a day, therefore quiet and private rooms should be implemented into design because it gives employees the space to pray during working hours. Catering to the religious beliefs of employees is inclusive and boosts diversity and enables those who do need a private space to pray to feel psychologically safe in their working environment.

4. Make technology diverse

Your offices spaces may be enhancing diversity through design, but what about your tools and technologies? Employers need to ensure that their technology is diverse too. Technology can be a great enabler in a workplace, but it can also exclude certain groups of people in society. For example, the use of facial recognition technology as access control to office buildings has been known to be less effective at recognising non-white faces, therefore excluding people from the building. This type of exclusion must be avoided at all costs to create an environment welcoming to all.

5. Address the ageing worker

A final way to boost diversity through design is to provide a safe environment for older workers, who are likely to remain in the workforce for longer due to the cost-of-living crisis. Age is a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. An ageing population is as a result of the continued decline in fertility rates and an increase in life expectancy. The baby boomer generation is still a key workforce cohort.

Research indicates that older workers do not want special adaptations that support their needs but draw attention to the physical deficiencies of ageing. Instead, they want inclusive design that improves things for everyone – from a healthy environment with lots of plants and natural light to spaces with opportunities to walk and exercise. Additionally, ergonomic desks and chairs should also be considered in designing the workplace to avoid musculoskeletal injuries of workers, a more common occurrence as we age.

These five ways to boost diversity through design target marginalised groups in society and make them visible in the workplace. As there is a move towards remote and hybrid working post-lockdown, it is crucial that the design in the workplace is diverse and inclusive as it meets the needs of all employees, enables better working relationships through shared understanding and

encourages employees to go into the office when they have a choice to work elsewhere.

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